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Book Reviews

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Review of *Media and Culture in the US Jewish Labor Movement: Sweating for Democracy in the Interwar Era* by Brian Dolber (Palgrave Macmillan)

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ABSTRACT Brian Dolber comprehensively explores the cultural and media-related developments of an important American social movement during its most transformative time: the varying business enterprises, community associations, party structures, and social institutions that collectively constituted 'US Jewish labor' in the decades between WWI and II. Dolber infuses his historical analysis with a nuance and urgency that ensures his readers will neither complacently shrug off the interwar era as limited in its relevance to our contemporary conjuncture nor nostalgically long for a supposedly romantic period of leftist political organizing in the US. Indeed, a tacit takeaway drawn from Dolber's book is that activists today (especially those experimenting with alternative media and cultural formations) can benefit greatly from both the inspiring examples of past precedence and a sober acceptance of the potential pitfalls that can threaten their efforts.

Media and Culture in the US Jewish Labor Movement: Sweating for Democracy in the Interwar Era. By Brian Dolber. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, 256 pp. (hardcover) ISBN 978 3 319 43547 3. US List: \$109.99.

Brian Dolber comprehensively explores the cultural and media-related developments of an important American social movement during its most transformative time: the varying business enterprises, community associations, party structures, and social institutions that collectively constituted "US Jewish labor" in the decades between WWI and WWII. Dolber infuses his historical analysis with nuance and urgency ensuring that his readers will neither complacently shrug off the interwar era as limited in its relevance to our contemporary conjuncture nor nostalgically long for a supposedly romantic period of leftist political organizing in the US. Indeed, a tacit takeaway drawn from Dolber's book is that activists today (especially those experimenting with alternative media and cultural formations) can benefit greatly from both the inspiring examples of past precedence and a sober acceptance of the potential pitfalls that can threaten their efforts.

Throughout the text, Dolber defines his terms carefully, providing ideas like "social unionism," "organic intellectualism," "cosmopolitan proletarianism," "historical bloc," "industrial feminism," and "ethnopolitical identity" to act as conceptual footholds for readers traversing his dizzyingly detailed account of US Jewish labor's trajectory through turbulent times. Focusing on the cultural initiatives of "education, mass media, and participatory activity," Dolber emphasizes how a complex and often-contradictory constellation of American Jewish actors and groups helped "bridge the radicalism of the turn of the century with the emergence of the modern labor movement during the Great Depression" (4).

Dolber's narrative begins with the emergence of influential US Jewish left-liberal newspaper *Forward* during WWI. As talismanic US Jewish émigré Baruch Charney Vladeck assumed its helm, *Forward* became a cultural vessel for navigating several important media shifts in the 1920s. These shifts included a growing dependence on advertising (especially targeting increasingly ethnically-defined market segments), the rise of photography and short-form journalism for an expanding and linguistically diverse readership, and the pressures of balancing competing political interests amidst the fragmentation of US labor into sectarian conflict. Vladeck ultimately charted *Forward* down an assimilatory path that interpolated its readers "into the matrices of an evolving consumer society" (15), while desperately attempting to prove that "Jewish national identity was compatible with American identity" (40). This same calculus informed Vladeck's embrace of radio (as evidenced by the rise of WEVD) as a media tool for protecting the economic sustainability of US Jewish labor, while ensuring that "the Yiddish Socialism of the prewar era[...] became American unionism, advancing social democracy within mass culture's limits" (111).

Vladeck's strategic capitulations are juxtaposed with the fiery defiance of two of his contemporaries, Fannia Cohn and J. B. S. Hardman. These garment union leaders dedicated their energies to unwaveringly principled cultural projects, the former leading the creation of "worker education" programming to galvanize women laborers' engagement in the public sphere, and the latter working to cultivate radical democracy across/within existing labor groups through several splinter organizations and newspapers. Though their efforts were eventually marginalized by pragmatic realities US Jewish labor faced within the Great Depression, "the cultural tools Cohn and Hardman developed would prove invaluable to the rise of a national labor movement" (81).

The New Deal signals a moment of fundamental transition in the book. This bureaucratized political economic response to the Great Depression created a host of challenges for the media and culture of US Jewish labor. While *Forward*, WEVD, and the garment unions' initiatives "provided the basis for new forms of mass entertainment that reflected the era's working-class ethos" (118), the rise of mass organizations like the CIO and the adoption by leftist parties of the "Popular Front strategy" resulted in the incorporation/erasure of American Jewish ethnic identity within the national labor movement amidst a growing tide of populist anti-Semitism across the international landscape.

As a result, US Jewish labor media and culture during the latter half of the 1930's consolidated around anti-Nazi consumer boycotting, shaping a movement that sought "new articulations of ethnicity" (156). Specifically, the founding by Vladeck of the boycott-leading Jewish Labor Committee helped produce a "social movement consumerism" that united Jewish Americans "across class and ideological lines" (171) and hastened a qualitative cultural transformation of US Jewish labor that, in retrospect, had already been years in the making. This was no longer a movement of "radical workers who happened to be Yiddish-speaking Jews; rather they were Jews who understood themselves as one constituency within a liberal New Deal" (181) and "maintained strong connections to the US state" (187) in opposition to the Nazi threat overseas.

The unresolved conflicts and debates repressed within such political accommodation became manifest in the fracturing of US Jewish labor, especially over the question of newspaper guilds and writers' unions. Otherwise ignored divisions within the movement began to spill over, as the management of several press-related organizations implemented reactionary measures, including prolonged legal battles and strike breaking tactics, against members of what had heretofore been understood to be "their own" community, ethnically and politically. By World War II, Hardman's vision of "true

democratic discourse” (212), both within and outside the movement, had stultified, and it became increasingly difficult for the remains of American Jewish labor “to challenge the institutions of the US political economy—the corporations, the government, the trade unions, and the media—in the coming decades” (213).

Indeed, by 2001, only a small group of activists are on hand to protest outside the headquarters of WEVD as it is being sold to Disney and converted into the flagship radio station for ESPN Sports, a particularly savage irony given the parent company’s legacy of anti-unionism and anti-Semitism (227). Dolber borrows from Raymond Williams in asking whether the “residual culture” emerging from the US Jewish labor movement and its media and culture during the pivotal interwar era will be a “productive, transformative force” or simply leave us with “a painful desire to return to something that never was” (229). His book, though often only hinting at rather than explicitly unpacking the myriad themes of contemporary relevance, presents a worthy case study for political organizers hoping to leverage social media and other emergent cultural platforms for radical change moving forward.

 [Bio](#)



David Reznik

David L. Reznik is Associate Professor of Sociology and advisor for the Cultural Studies minor at Bridgewater College. His book, [New Jews?: Race and American Jewish Identity in 21st-Century Film](#), is available in paperback. He has also written on the everyday challenges and utopian dreams of contemporary independent filmmakers. Currently, he is working on a narrative podcast series about the ethnic identity politics of an infamous 2006 murder trial in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.

